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Committee on the Rights of the Child

Combined third to sixth periodic reports submitted by the Lao People's Democratic Republic under article 44 of the Convention, due in 2016*

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Abbreviations

ANC	Antenatal care
CMC	Commission on Mothers and Children
Committee	Committee on the Rights of the Child
CPN	Child Protection Networks
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DCMC	District Commission for Mothers and Children
EQS	Education Quality Standards
ESDP	Education Sector Development Plan
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LSIS	Lao Social Indicator Survey
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MCMC	Ministerial Commission for Mothers and Children
MNCH	Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Service
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
MoPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MoPS	Ministry of Public Security
NPAMC	National Plan of Action for Mothers and Children
NERI	National Economic Research Institute
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OPAC	Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict
OPSC	Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography
PCMC	Provincial Commission for Mothers and Children
PHC	Population and Housing Census
RMNCH	Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

UXO	Unexploded ordinances
VTE	Vientiane
WASH	Water supply, sanitation and hygiene

I. Introduction

1. Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 8 May 1991. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) considered the second periodic report (CRC/C/LAO/2) in January 2011.

A. Preparation and structure of report

2. This report is a combined third, fourth, fifth and sixth periodic report that responds to the relevant concluding observations from the second periodic report (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2) and covers the period between 2011-2016. It also contains information relevant to the implementation of the Optional Protocols during the period between 2015-2016 as a follow-up to the relevant concluding observations from the initial reports (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1 & CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1).

3. The report has been drafted under the supervision of the National Commission for Mothers and Children (NCMC), a governmental body composed of focal points from 23 ministries and organizations. Training sessions were organized with members of the NCMC, Ministerial (MCMC), Provincial (PCMC) and District (DCMC) Commissions for Mothers and Children, their Secretariats, and target schools. The trainings focused on the CRC reporting process, the implementation of the CRC, concluding observations from the second periodic report, and the reports and concluding observations under the Optional Protocols. Capacity building on child participation and consultations with children was also included in the training.

B. Consultations

4. The NCMC conducted a series of consultation workshops with the support of Government, UNICEF and INGOs. Three consultation workshops were held at the ministerial level to collect data. Trainings on drafting provincial reports were conducted in nine provinces.

5. Consultations with children were held in eleven districts in nine provinces to obtain input on the implementation of the CRC at provincial level. The NCMC Secretariat, in collaboration with INGOs, developed a manual on child participation in the CRC reporting process. Consultations with children ages 6-11 years were conducted in primary schools and with children aged 11-18 years in secondary schools, with support and assistance from teams composed of NCMC, PCMC, INGOs and local civil society organizations (CSO). In total, 558 children (332 girls) between the ages of 6-18 were consulted.

6. Consultations were conducted with selected child victims, disadvantaged children (children with disabilities); children from ethnic minority groups and parents from target provinces and districts. Through games, drawings, and group discussions, children were asked to give their opinion based on their direct experience in their family, school and communities on the general principles, focusing on survival and development and child participation, and special protection measures, including violence against children. Children were also asked to provide recommendations as to how they would tackle the concerns identified.

II. General measures of implementation

A. Legislation (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 9)

7. Lao PDR has made significant progress incorporating the CRC into national law and policies, and establishing a basic legal framework for child protection. The amended Constitution of Lao PDR (2015) incorporates in Article 34 that the State respects, protects and ensures human rights and fundamental rights of Lao citizens in accordance with the law.

The Law on Making Legislation (2012) states in Article 9 that "if the provisions of existing legislation and newly adopted legislation are inconsistent with the provisions of international conventions or treaties that Lao PDR is party to, the provisions of the international convention or treaty prevails and [the provisions of] existing legislation or newly adopted legislation shall be revised in due time." Article 50 notes that a comprehensive review of a draft law must take place to ensure its consistency with international agreements and treaties to which Lao PDR is a party. Therefore, the provisions of the CRC are given priority over national laws.

8. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure (2014) complies with international standards on justice for children, including child-friendly and gender-appropriate provisions for children in contact with the law (offenders, victims and witnesses) and the right to have a parent/guardian/social worker/psychologist/lawyer present during the legal process. The Adoption Decree (2014) conforms to substantive provisions of the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption. The amended Labour Law (2014) complies with International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 138 and 182. The Law on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Children (2015), the revision to the Education Law (2015) and the Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2016) all take into account provisions of the CRC. The Legal Sector Master Plan (2009-2020), the Social Welfare Strategic Development Plan (2011-2020) and the National Commission for Mothers and Children Strategy (2016-2025) and Vision for 2030 together provide a foundation for supporting children's rights and families' access to services. National strategies and plans of action that take into account the provisions of the CRC have been developed in the areas of inclusive education, nutrition, and violence.

9. Additional human and financial resources have been allocated to implement these laws, policies and plans of action. The National Assembly increased the number of Departments under the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee (Department of Population, Department of other Social Cultural issues) and Economy and Planning Committee (Department of Budget, Department of Economy) to respond effectively to the volume of work. The Social Welfare Strategic Development Plan (2011-2020), developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW), aims to strengthen and develop the social welfare system to provide social security and social welfare services equitably and effectively. The Ministry of Finance has strengthened legislation in the public finance sector, including drafting the Decree on Revenue Sharing between central and local levels, a policy paper on Public Finance Development and the Decree on Budget Norm. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in collaboration with provincial and district administrations, is implementing the National Governance and Public Administration Reform Program (NGPAR) across the country. The District Development Fund is a key component of NGPAR and attempts to integrate various financing facilities into the governance reform process at the district level. Grants delivered to district administrations allow them to plan expenditures at their own discretion and tailor activities to district-specific needs.

B. Coordination (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 11)

10. The National Commission for Mothers and Children (NCMC) was the focal point for implementing and coordinating activities on the CRC and the Optional Protocols at the national and provincial levels through 2016. It is the leading agency for Government in managing, developing, and promoting all the work related to mothers and children nationwide.

11. In 2013, budget allocation for the NCMC moved from a level 2 to a level 1 budget, which increased funding from 1.1 billion Kip in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 to 1.6 billion Kip in 2015-2016. The NCMC has also actively raised and encouraged financial contributions from State and private businesses, development partners and INGOs. The staff of the Secretariat of the NCMC increased from two permanent and five temporary staff members in 2011 to fifteen permanent staff members in 2014. The Secretariat of the NCMC currently has five divisions: administration, policy and legislation, planning and budgeting, development, and information, communications and public events.

12. The organization and the performance of the PCMCs have improved as funding and staffing have increased. The National Plan of Action on Mothers and Children (NPAMC) (2016-2020) strives to improve the coordination mechanisms between different sectors and the local level and build capacity for the Secretariat of the CMCs at each level nationwide. The NCMC and the CMCs prepare reports every six months. The results of the NCMC annual review meeting and progress on the implementation on the work being done by the NCMC and the CMCs are disseminated through the mass media, including Lao national television, radio and print media.

13. The NCMC holds annual meetings with the MCMCs and PCMCs to provide updates on its activities and to receive inputs and feedback from the sub-national level. The NCMC also held regular review meetings on the implementation of the 2011-2015 National Strategy for Mothers and Children, the 2011-2015 National Plan of Action for Mothers and Children (NPAMC), and the CRC, along with the recommendations of the Committee. Coordination, monitoring and reporting mechanisms have been developed or improved and lessons learned on implementation are being shared including through the creation and development of the NCMC website. Thirty-six training sessions for members of CMCs and Government officials at each level, held between 2011-2015, trained a total of 1,848 participants and 45 visits to CMCs were conducted to monitor and provide support on the implementation of the National Strategy and Plan of Action and other key documents.

14. In November 2016, the NCMC was merged with the National Commission for the Advancement of Women to form the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children. The two Secretariats were merged into one under the Lao Women's Union. This merger will also occur at the provincial and district during 2017. The new structure will have an implementation role and will manage the hotlines and shelters.

C. National Plan of Action (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 13)

15. The NPAMC (2011-2015) focused on the implementation of six key program areas: promotion of the mothers and child health; child education development; child protection; child and youth participation; international cooperation; and organization structure improvement. The NPAMC (2016-2020) consists of five programs: revision of the policy and legislation, development of baseline data, statistics and research; implementation of global and regional commitments; protection of the rights of mothers and children (healthcare, education and sport, protection and assistance, child participation); awareness-raising and public events; and improvement of organizational structure and capacity building of staff members.

16. The Plan of Action is to be integrated into the work plans and budget of each sector, organization and locality to ensure its effective implementation. The NCMC is responsible for coordinating, monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the National Plan of Action. Human and financial resources to implement the Plan of Action will be based on the priorities of Government in relation to the socio-economic development of Lao PDR. Funding and support is also being sought from development partners, neighboring countries, and INGOs.

D. Independent monitoring (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 15) (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1, para. 9 and para. 27)

17. The NCMC is responsible for monitoring violations of children's rights in Lao PDR. Due to its limited capacity and budget, there is no national human rights institution as specified in the Paris Principles in Lao PDR. At present, efforts are being made to strengthen existing national mechanisms, including those that deal with human rights complaints.

18. Lao PDR has not signed the Optional Protocol on a communication procedure. Individual complaints mechanisms are being studied but, at this stage, the focus is on improving national complaints mechanisms. The NCMC is currently not mandated to

receive independent complaints. Child Protection Networks (CPN) and Mediation Committees are however available at the local level.

E. Allocation of resources (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 17)

19. Between 2011 and 2015, Government increased investment in the social sector to 35% of the total budget. The education budget increased from 13.2% in 2010-2011 to 15.8% in 2015-2016. Funding from the general expenditure plus official development assistance (ODA) increased spending on education to 17% of the total budget in 2015-2016. The revised Law on Education set the budget allocation for the educational sector to a minimum of 18%. The Educational Sector Development Plan (2016-2020) highlights the need to increase investment to expand early childhood, primary, and lower secondary education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and to raise education quality.

20. Government also increased health spending from 8% of the general expenditure plus ODA in 2013-2014 to 9% in 2015-2016. Government has been steadily increasing spending in the area of maternal and child health. For example, the budget for the procurement of traditional vaccines increased from US$ 24,000 in 2012 to an estimated US$ 640,000 in 2014 and the budget for health outreach has tripled — a major step towards sustainable and predictable funding for preventative services. For the first time, Government included the financing of nutrition commodities in the national budget for the fiscal year 2015-2016.

21. Budget expenditure frameworks and financial sustainability plans have been drafted in areas such as nutrition, vaccinations and sanitation and hygiene and budget tracking has been introduced in the education sector.

F. Data collection (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 19), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 8), (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1, para. 13)

22. A Population and Housing Census (PHC) was conducted in March 2015 with key national results and analysis released in October 2016. Detailed and disaggregated information was collected on population size, growth and distribution, demographic and social characteristics, fertility, mortality, internal migration, education and literacy, disability, economic activity, households and household characteristics, and housing. Government, planners and policy-makers will use the data from the census to facilitate planning and decision making, in particular for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the 8th National Socio-Economic Plan (NSEDP) (2016-2020) and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In-depth analysis is planned on various topics, including fertility, mortality, migration, population projections, economic activity, poverty, youth, gender and disabilities.

23. Accurate and comprehensive data collection is still a challenge in Lao PDR. Due to limited capacity, national budget, and lack of support and technical assistance from development partners, a national central database on children has not yet been developed. Government has however made progress on the collection of statistics and has established statistics centers in all provinces and districts. LaoInfo,[1] the national socio-economic database at the Lao Statistics Bureau, is a key statistical tool and a data source for the NSEDP and other national development frameworks. Lao EduInfo,[2] developed with the assistance of UNICEF, monitors and disseminates education data in Lao PDR. This database was used in 2013-2014 to produce a national Education for All report and an equity based analysis.

24. Disaggregated data from surveys is available and accessible for evidence-based sub-national planning. In 2011, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Planning and

[1] http://laoinfo.gov.la/laoinfo/

[2] http://www.devinfo.org/laoedunfo/libraries/aspx/Home.aspx

Investment (MoPI) conducted a nation-wide household-based survey of social development indicators. The Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) (2011-2012) generated disaggregated social data at the provincial level that is being used by Government and development partners to prepare policies, strategies and planning to improve the social environment. Information was collected on water and sanitation, marriage and sexual activity, fertility, reproductive health, adult and maternal mortality, child health, nutrition, child mortality, child development, literacy and education, child protection, HIV/AIDS and sexual behavior, and access to mass media and use of the Internet. Findings from the Social Indicator Survey have provided critical input for sector reform processes. The Social Indicator Survey will be repeated in 2016-2017.

25. Other recent surveys and studies that collected data on children include the National Child Labour Survey (2010), Child-Sensitive Social Protection Study (2010), Study on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (2011), Study on the Causes and Impact of Internal Migration on Children (2011), Child Well-being and Disparity Study (2012), Assessment of Existing Mediation Practices involving Children (2013), National Survey on Violence against Children (2014) and the Population and Housing Census (2015). These studies have provided useful information and data in the development of strategies, policies and work plans.

26. The National Economic Research Institute (NERI), a think-tank of MoPI, has strengthened its capacity to provide macro-level policy advice on long-term development goals, social research methodologies and analysis. Government worked with NERI to produce disaggregated data from key selected equity-focused research and studies to inform advocacy, social inclusive, and economic development strategies that benefit children and women. In 2015, Government initiated two studies, the National Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis, using data from the LSIS, and the Out of School Children Initiative. The key research findings were disseminated to the National Assembly and Provincial decision makers.

27. At the regional level, the New Delhi Declaration of the Second High Level Meeting on South-South Cooperation for Child Rights in Asia and the Pacific (2013) set out a roadmap to improve methodologies for data collection to advance children's rights and the undertaking of multi-country research and studies into children's issues.

28. The National Strategy for Mothers and Children (2016-2025) highlights the need for research and studies to develop disaggregated baseline data from all provinces that can be used as a basis for the implementation of the CRC. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a program on the development of baseline data, statistics and research with the objective of ensuring that research, studies, data and statistics are disaggregated and used as the basis for reporting on the implementation of international conventions concerning children and the development of plans for mothers and children. Technical assistance and support from UNICEF and other development partners would be required to establish a national central database on children.

G. Dissemination and awareness-raising (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 21)

29. The NCMC has carried out dissemination campaigns on child rights, printed and distributed booklets on the CRC and Optional Protocols, and created posters and cartoons on child rights which have been distributed to students and other stakeholders. The CRC, Optional Protocols and the concluding observations have been translated into Lao, printed and distributed nationwide and are available on the website of the NCMC. A child-friendly booklet, 'Our Rights', was developed in 2012 and has been printed and distributed annually to local CMCs and to children in primary and secondary schools nationwide. Posters on children's rights have also been produced annually since 2012 and distributed to primary and secondary schools nationwide in conjunction with awareness-raising sessions. CDs on the CRC, Optional Protocols and the concluding observations have been produced and distributed annually since 2012 to local CMCs, television, radio, newspaper, parents, children and local authorities.

30. In 2015, NERI organized dissemination workshops and seminars with National Assembly members and Provincial level decision makers on the National Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis. The purpose of these workshops was to create awareness on the status of children and women and socio-economic development. Approximately 100 key decision and policy makers attended these workshops.

31. Under the Master Plan for Law Development, which aims to strengthen the rule of law in Lao PDR, Government translated and published and disseminated the core human rights treaties. Under the Master Plan, Government aims to raise legal awareness by developing a database on legal and justice sector activities. In 2013, the Treaties and Law Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) supported students from the Law Faculty of the National University of Laos to conduct awareness-raising activities on children's rights in secondary schools.

32. At the provincial level, dissemination and awareness-raising about the CRC and Optional Protocols, national and international laws and legislation, and strategies and plans of action were provided to local authorities and in schools. Dissemination and awareness-raising activities on the CRC and Optional Protocols were provided to the concerned sectors in provinces, Vientiane (VTE) Capital, districts, villages and schools 867 times. Approximately 905,773 people (108,053 female participants) participated in these dissemination and awareness-raising activities. Dissemination of laws and legislation related to mothers and children was provided to Government officials from concerned sectors in the provinces, VTE Capital, districts and villages 2,495 times. Approximately 504,238 (234,272 females) participated in these dissemination and awareness-raising activities. The Strategy for Mothers and Children, NPAMC and National Plan of Action on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children were disseminated to concerned sectors in the provinces and VTE Capital, districts and villages 10,751 times. Approximately 53,393 people (35,046 females) participated in these dissemination and awareness-raising activities.

33. Through its program for child and youth participation, NCMC provided information on children's rights through national and local radio via the AM (567 kHz) system with broadcasts taking place on Saturdays and Sundays. A total of 192 broadcasting programs covering topics such as Lao youth advancement, fundamental rights of the child, and discussions on children's rights have been broadcast on Lao National Radio.

34. Information about children's rights and violence against children has also been disseminated through different media outlets such as television, radio, public speakers, and print media approximately 3,014 times. Every year children and parents participate in events held to celebrate national children's day to raise awareness about children's rights and encourage children to participate and express their views/opinions through art performances.

35. A number of international organizations, such as UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and INGOs are providing support in the provinces to disseminate and raise awareness about children's rights, particularly related to issues around health, education and protection.

36. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a program on awareness-raising and public events which aims to raise awareness on national legislation, international and regional legislation related to children's rights, children's development, the protection of children and child participation through different channels and conduct public events in connection with the International Children's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children. Specific projects will focus on raising awareness on the CRC, violence against children and birth registration.

H. Training (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 23)

37. In 2013 and 2015, NCMC developed and printed 500 training handbooks entitled "Child Participation" and "Children's Rights". Training sessions on child participation and children's rights were conducted for local CMCs, schools and child target groups. The

NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a project on training of trainers at the provincial and district level to disseminate, monitor and support the work related to mothers and children in the areas of nutrition, birth registration, immunization, hygiene and sanitation, early childhood development, violence against children, child labor, drug abuse, reproductive health and child marriage.

38. Under the Legal Sector Master Plan, human rights training of law enforcement officials has been carried out. Training was provided to judges and legal staff on juvenile justice with a particular focus on interviewing child victims and witnesses. The Treaties and Law Department of MoFA conducted three summer training courses (2010, 2011, 2013) on international laws and human rights, including the CRC, for law school students. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a project on training on international and regional treaties and national laws related to child justice. Human rights education is included in the plans for in- and pre-service training of schoolteachers.

39. The MoLSW conducted trainings to strengthen the capacity of officials working in the labor and social welfare sector and social workers in 321 villages and 35 districts in 9 provinces. Children's rights have been included in training manuals that were printed and distributed to all CPNs. The MoLSW and the National University, with UNICEF support, have developed a curriculum for a para-professional social work training course, which includes modules on children's rights. The course has been delivered to 4323 key child protection stakeholders and service providers in 496 villages and 35 districts in 8 provinces. The MoH has provided training on nutritional guidelines to village health care centers. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) has conducted trainings on guidelines on gender parity in 8 provinces.

40. Human rights and child rights education are integrated into the school curriculum at all levels. A specific additional curriculum on human and child rights is being developed and piloted in some schools during 2016.

I. Cooperation with civil society (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 25), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 20)

41. Government encourages the participation of CSOs in the implementation of the CRC and other international human rights mechanisms. CSOs have been involved in the preparation of reports to human rights treaty bodies, including this report, and in national and provincial dissemination meetings on the concluding observations.

42. CSOs have been established in the Lao PDR in the form of social and vocational organizations and non-profit associations. INGOs also operate actively in Laos and contribute to socio-economic development and poverty eradication. There are currently 140 CSOs, 9 foundations and 186 INGOs operating in the country. 10 CSOs, 5 foundations and 20 INGOs focus on children.

43. The Decree on Associations (2009) created legal regulations to manage the activities of local CSOs and the Decree on Foundations (2011) did the same for foundations. A Decree on International Non-Governmental Organizations (2010) was followed by a set of guidelines for the implementation of the Decree (2015). The Decree on Overseas Development Assistance is currently being revised and will include management of ODA received by local CSOs and INGOs. These decrees provide a legal foundation to create conditions conducive to the expansion of social organizations so that they may contribute to national development, poverty eradication, and respect for human rights in Lao PDR.

44. Some examples of civil society partnerships include the UN Girl's Education Initiative, undertaken by the Inclusive Education Technical Working Group, co-chaired by the MoES and Plan International, the National Nutrition Committee, composed of Government and development partners, which discusses multi-sectoral responses to undernutrition, and a multi-stakeholder partnership to address high levels of iron deficient anemia and other micronutrient deficiencies. Through the End Violence Communication Initiative, the NCMC worked closely with development partners, local CSOs, and INGOs to raise awareness about violence against children.

III. General principles

A. Non-discrimination (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 27)

45. The amended Constitution (2015) applies the policy of solidarity and equality between ethnic minorities. Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic group. The LSIS generated disaggregated social data at the provincial level for the first time. Data was disaggregated by a number of factors including age, sex, ethnic origin, and social background. Data on disability was not collected. The survey highlighted marked disparities across the country for all indicators based on geography, gender, educational level and language group. Findings from the LSIS have provided critical input into social sector reform.

46. The revised Education Law states that all Lao citizens, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, and physical and socio-economic status have equitable rights to education. It further requires that poor families, disadvantaged groups, disabled learners, gifted or outstanding students, female and ethnic groups receive support. The Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) (2016-2020) provides a special focus on disadvantaged children (especially ethnic children, children with disabilities and children living in remote areas) and ensuring gender equity.

47. The Education for All National Plan of Actions (2000-2005, 2006-2010, 2011-2015) sought to provide equitable access in the areas of early childhood care and development, primary and lower secondary education, and non-formal education and skills training. The 2011-2015 National Policy on Inclusive Education and the National Strategy and Action Plan on Inclusive Education were developed to provide a guiding framework for the provision of quality education to reduce and eventually eliminate disparities in access to education of disadvantaged groups, especially girls and women, ethnic groups, people with disabilities and people in socio-economic difficulty. Although gender parity in education has not yet been achieved, the gender parity for primary graduation was 0.99 in 2014-2015 and graduation rates in lower secondary has improved annually from 0.87 in 2012-13 to 0.94 in 2014-15 and may reach equity (between 0.97 and 1.03) in the next year or two. An evaluation of the National Action Plan and the development of a new action plan are in progress.

48. Considerable attention is being paid at the provincial level to ensure that the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children (2007) that states that all children are equal in all aspects without discrimination of any kind in respect of gender, race, ethnicity, language, beliefs, religion, physical and socio-economic status is being implemented to ensure that all children have equal access to education, health services and cultural participation. Special care is being provided to ensure that children with disabilities and ethnic minority children are able to enjoy their rights on an equal basis.

B. Best interests of the child (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 29)

49. The principle of the best interests of the child has been integrated into child protection legislation, first and foremost, the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure, Decree on Adoption of Children, and Law on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Children make specific reference to ensuring that the best interests of the child are of primary consideration, including during legal proceedings.

50. The health sector has paid particular attention to ensuring that the best interests of the child are taken into account with regards to healthcare, healthcare services, and the expansion of health centers to remote areas. The education sector strives to ensure that the best interests of the child are taken into account to guarantee equal access to compulsory education, particularly for children living in remote areas, children with disabilities and ethnic minority children. An increase in the number of nurseries and playgrounds are examples of action taken by the MoES to promote the best interests of the child.

51. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure requires that juvenile cases be resolved to protect the rights and best interest of children. Village Medication Units and Child Court Chambers were established at the provincial and VTE Capital courts to better take into account the best interests of the child.

C. Respect for the views of the child (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 31), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 22)

52. Children have increasing opportunities to advocate for their rights through radio, television and other forums. Two hundred people in 13 provinces were trained as Youth Radio reporters to provide young people with an opportunity to express their views. In 2014, in addition to regular pieces on health and education, the radio featured UNICEF's Early Childhood Development television program, messages related to violence against children, and the celebration on the 25th anniversary of the CRC. Radio stations have developed their own Facebook pages that allow children to express their opinions. Recent studies, research and assessments on children take into account their views.

53. During the consultation with children, the children expressed their view that the majority of children had a basic understanding of the CRC and had participated in CRC related activities. Through various activities, children contributed to decision-making, expressed their opinions and participated in creative activities. They noted however that many children (especially children in remote areas) do not have the opportunity to participate in activities at the family or community levels. Children felt that even though they were asked to participate in public events in their community or school, they were not given the opportunity to share their opinions and there was limited acceptance to their participation. The children asked to be heard and treated with respect and have more opportunities to be listened to and express their ideas.

54. A number of different Ministries and partner agencies have been working to raise awareness of persons working with or for children on the need to respect the views of the child. Particular emphasis has recently been placed on the incorporation of human rights training into in- and pre-service teacher and law enforcement officials' training. Under the leadership of NCMC, a training handbook on child participation was developed and four trainings have been organized since 2011 on child participation for Child Mediation Units at each level and departments from key ministries working with children. A total of 248 participants were trained nationwide. Since 2011, twelve trainings (600 participants) have been conducted on children's rights with participation of mass organizations and the Secretariats of CMCs at each level. Additional funding is needed to organize training workshops on child participation on an ongoing basis for those working with or for children as well as for parents and guardians.

55. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a project on child participation which aims to create opportunities and conditions for children from all ethnic minorities to participate in activities in society, to create conditions for children to share their opinions with each other, to participate in social development, and to implement child participation principles whereby children can express their opinions which are heard and considered. The project includes trainings on skills to express opinions for children and on listening skills and considering children's opinions for professional working with and for children.

56. In terms of child participation in legal proceedings, the Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure allows children to receive legal assistance from lawyers or other protectors. The child also has the right to object to this representative. Child victims and witnesses have the right to participate in legal proceeding and give his/her opinion in all stages of the proceedings. At the provincial level, Village Mediation Units and Child Court Chambers apply the principle of respecting the views of children in all cases involving children, both for child offenders and child witnesses. Child participation is also included in the Labor Law, Social Security Law, Decree on Skill Development, Decree on Social Welfare, and Decree on Persons with Disabilities.

D. Right to life, survival and development (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 33), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 22), (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1, para. 25)

57. The overall goal of the NSEDP (2016-2020) is continued poverty reduction, graduation from Least Developed Country status through realization of national development potential and comparative advantages, effective management and utilization of natural resources and strong regional and international integration. In order to enable relevant ministries to formulate appropriate policy frameworks to address deprivation, a number of studies and analyses were conducted. The Child Well-being and Disparities Study (2012), commissioned by the MCM, in collaboration with the MoPI with support from UNICEF, aimed to present the latest evidence on the deprivation and disparities affecting children to support decision-makers in formulating and refining targeted responses. The National Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (2015), carried out by the NERI, MoPI and UNICEF, focused on the specific deprivations of infants and children in early childhood in areas such as health, nutrition, child care, housing, violence, and water and sanitation.

58. Efforts to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas were central to the overarching goal of NSEDP (2011-2015) of achieving 'growth with equity'. Although the gap has been reduced, rural areas still have a poverty rate 2.9 times higher than that of urban areas. Poverty is concentrated in remote or mountainous regions in the north and south. Successful poverty reduction efforts are attributed to many factors, including the construction of road and infrastructure in rural areas. One of the key outcomes of the NSEDP (2016-2020) is to achieve off-track Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through the provision and use of services that are balanced geographically and distributed equitably between social groups.

59. Decentralization is a central component in public sector reform through the Three Builds (Sam Sang) Directive (2012). This directive proposes that provinces are built up as strategy-making units, that districts are strengthened as integration units, and that villages become development units. Fifty-two districts and 109 villages were piloting the Three Builds Directive in 2015. Ideally, district governments have the authority and resources to implement policies and to take full ownership of local development and public service delivery. In practice, however, district capacities in planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring need to be strengthened, so that districts are able to fulfill their roles of reaching those most vulnerable with the required interventions.

60. Chronic malnutrition remains a serious problem in Lao PDR. Improvements in malnutrition have been slow due to inadequate feeding practices, low coverage of priority nutrition interventions, poor hygiene and sanitation and poor maternal care and nutrition. The immediate causes of malnutrition are inadequate nutrient intake and food- water- and vector-borne and infectious diseases. The underlying causes are the availability of adequate food, lack of access to food, poor mother and childcare practices, poor environmental hygiene and poor access to health services. High disparities in malnutrition mostly relate to household poverty, mothers with low education levels, and ethnic groups residing in remote areas with no access to clean water, sanitation, environment and health services. Malnutrition is also associated with beliefs, customs, and traditions that can lead to incorrect nutritional practices.

61. Malaria cases started rising again from 2012 due to malaria outbreaks in the south of the country. Malaria diagnosis and treatment is on track with over 90% of cases with confirmed malaria being treated in 2014-2015. However, bed net coverage needs to be increased. The worsening situation of multi-drug resistance malaria needs to be urgently tackled in cooperation with other governments, private health care providers and private retail outlets selling malaria medicines.

62. Road traffic accidents are the primary cause of death for young people, with alcohol, speeding and violations of traffic rules being contributing factors. Rates of accidents involving children have however decreased from 915 in 2011 to 980 in 2014. Education and public awareness campaigns related to helmets, drunk driving, mobile phone use and

speeding aimed at young motorcyclists and school students have been carried out by INGOs and CSOs in collaboration with the Ministries of Public Works and Transport, Public Security, Education and Public Health.

63. Addressing the impact of unexploded ordinances (UXO) remains a challenge. With an estimated 8.7 million hectares contaminated by UXO, Lao PDR has only cleared over 55,000 hectares since 1996. Resources have been amongst the constraints to expanding UXO clearance, but the United States Government announced in 2016 that it will provide an additional $1 000 million over three years for UXO clearance. On the positive side, the National Regulatory Authority on UXO reports that the number of casualties has dropped from 38 children injured and 14 killed in 2011 to 17 injured and 2 killed in 2015. However, whilst the overall number of children killed or injured by UXO has decreased dramatically, children represented 61% of all reported cases of UXO victims in 2013 compared to 41.1% in 2012 and 56.6% in 2011. UXO accidents occurred while children were working in fields or gardens, making fires, cooking or playing with a UXO. Government, with support from United Nations (UN) agencies and development partners, provides victim assistance to children in need of medical treatment from accidents with UXOs. Risk education and community awareness operations were carried out in 1,241 villages in 2015 reaching 154,816 children.

64. Government adopted a National Strategic Plan for the UXO Sector to achieve its UXO clearance and development objectives called "Safe Path Forward II" 2011-2020. The strategic goal of the Plan is to reduce the humanitarian and socio-economic threats posed by UXOs. The Plan suggests that one of the ways to reduce the number of UXO casualties is to deliver targeted risk education focusing on behavior change within identified at-risk groups, awareness-raising in response to UXO accidents, and classroom-based education for school children in contaminated areas. Government acknowledges that long-term strategies are needed to strengthen national capacities as well as provide institutional support to the UXO sector, given the scale and scope of the issue, which lies well beyond national capacities.

IV. Civil rights and freedoms

A. Name and birth registration (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 35), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 25), (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1, para. 15)

65. The Family Registration Law (2009) requires families to notify the village head within 30 days of a birth and the village chief to issue a birth certificate within 5 days. Government is committed to introducing a compulsory civil registration and vital statistics system, especially for birth and death statistics. In 2012, the Lao Statistics Bureau carried out a comprehensive assessment of the civil registration system in Lao PDR and a Strategic Plan for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics has been finalized and was submitted to Government for approval in December 2016. The Plan would introduce a compulsory civil registration and vital statistics system with mandatory birth registration in all districts. It aims to have 70% of births officially registered by 2024.

66. According to the LSIS, 75% of all children under the age of five were registered. Of children registered, 33% are reported to have a birth certificate. The 'Family Book', in which births, marriages and deaths are recorded and witnessed by the village chief, and 'Birth Delivery Certificates', are usually used in lieu of birth certificates. There are no fees for birth registration, but there may be a nominal fee to receive a birth certificate. Birth registration and the possession of a birth certificate is not a requirement for accessing basic social services such as health care and education.

67. Although Lao citizens are very aware of the Family-book system given that it has been in place for decades, provincial and district Government officials have emphasized the need to raise awareness amongst the public about the birth registration system. Efforts are being made at the provincial level to transform legislation on birth registration into

guidelines and develop manuals that clearly define the roles of the provinces, districts and villages to implement birth registration in practice.

68. The LSIS showed that 88% of children in urban areas were registered, compared to 71% in rural areas. The main obstacles to birth registration are the lack of community knowledge, physical accessibility and costs associated with registration, lack of clear procedures and administrative processes to register children and geographical. Currently there are no mobile units for birth registration and the issuance of birth certificates although, in some districts, the Home Affairs Office will go to villages to register births. The Strategic Plan for Civil Registration includes a plan to introduce mobile registration units for rural areas.

69. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes an objective to raise awareness about birth registration to make people understand the importance of registration and follow the laws and regulations on birth registration.

Preservation of identity

70. Under the Decree on Adoption of Children, the Home Affairs Sector can change the name and family name of the adopted child based on a proposal from the adoptive parent (Article 69) who must consider the best interests of the child (Article 51). The best interest of the child is the first priority in adoptions and a child's opinion is to be taken into account, with consideration being given to the age and maturity of the child (Article 5).

B. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 37)

71. According to the 2015 PHC, 64.7% of the population is Buddhist and 1.7% is Christian. A large proportion of the population (31.4%) reported having no religion.

72. Under the amended Constitution, the State respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and followers of other religions, prohibits all acts creating divisions between religions, and ensures the right to believe or not to believe in religion. The Decree on the Management and Protection of Religious Activities, revised in 2016, outlines the rules for religious practice and defines Government's role in ensuring that the Constitution is respected. At the provincial level, tolerance and interreligious dialogue are being promoted.

V. Violence against children

73. The Law on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Children (Law on Violence) explicitly prohibits all forms of violence against women and children by a member of the family and by other people, including authorities and staff members, and in all settings, including in the home, community, workplace, educational settings, and alternative care settings. Four types of violence against children are prohibited: physical, psychological, sexual and property and economic. Under the Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure children are protected from physical harm, torture, threat, and violation of dignity in every stage of the proceedings (Article 7), no form of violence can be used when a child is in custody for investigation-interrogation (Article 64) and child offenders who are sent to training centers are protected from all form of torture, abuse and inappropriate discipline (Article 103).

A. Corporal punishment (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 39)

74. Physical violence against children, defined as abuse, torture, hitting, kicking, pushing, or throwing a child, is prohibited in all settings by the Law on Violence. The revised Education Law prohibits teachers from beating, scolding and being cruel to students. Schools of Quality, adopted by the MoES as Government policy, requires schools to promote protection from physical (beating) and emotional (verbal harassment, bullying) punishments, and provide a healthy, safe and protective environment for children including

a school free from corporal punishment and harassment. The National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education (2011-2015) and early childhood development policies promote positive discipline in the school environment.

75. The LSIS found that 76% of Lao children aged 2-14 were subject to at least one form of psychological aggression or physical punishment from an adult in their household. The Survey also revealed that physical violence is seen as an acceptable way to discipline and educate a child in Lao PDR with 42% of adults believing that physical punishment was necessary to properly raise a child.

76. Children highlighted during the consultation that physical and emotional violence are still present and accepted in communities and schools. They also mentioned domestic violence, including sexual abuse in the family, as a matter that needed to be addressed. Children would like their families to be informed about positive discipline.

77. The Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children provides for awareness-raising on preventing and combating violence against children to change behaviors and eliminate cultural and customary beliefs and attitudes. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a similar objective in its program on awareness-raising. The End Violence Communication Initiative, led by the NCMC and UNICEF in collaboration with civil society and development partners, has increased awareness of different forms of violence against children in Lao PDR at both the national and sub-national levels. Key messages are being developed and disseminated through various communication channels, and a long-term social mobilization and behavior change communication strategy is being developed to ensure that violence against children is no longer recognized as acceptable in Lao society. A long-term social and behavior change communication campaign will be designed to trigger a shift in the overall social norms related to violence against children. This will address both the harmful social norms that contribute to violence against children, whilst reinforcing behaviors and practices that protect children from violence. It will focus on changing attitudes and practices of key stakeholders through a combination of communication approaches so that violence is no longer seen as acceptable in Lao society.

78. The NCMC and Save the Children collaborated on a positive discipline project. A manual on constructive and non-violent child education was published and disseminated and training was conducted for Government staff. In 2016, training for parents of young children on positive discipline was being piloted.

B. Follow-up to study on violence (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 40)

National comprehensive strategy to prevent and address all forms of violence

79. The National Plan of Action to Prevent and Eliminate Violence against Women and Children (2014-2020) addresses all forms of violence in all settings. It comprises three main programs: review of policies and legislation and establishment of databases and research; prevention of violence against women and children; and responses to violence against women and children to ensure access to services for its health- and protection-related consequences. 3,000 copies of the National Plan of Action have been distributed. The NPAMC (2016-2020) includes a project on the dissemination and monitoring of the implementation of the National Plan of Action on Violence.

National legal ban on all forms of violence against children in all settings

80. The Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children prohibits physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence against women and children in all settings and includes prevention, protection and assistance to women and children who have experienced violence. It explicitly states that no custom, tradition or belief should be invoked to justify violence and, for the first time, introduces specific protection and assistance measures for victims of violence. It also provides for re-education, compromise, mediation or judicial proceedings against perpetrators of violence.

81. At the regional level, Lao PDR has committed to several important declarations relating to violence against children. This includes the 2015 ASEAN Regional Plan of

Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children, the 2013 New Delhi Declaration on South-South Cooperation on the Rights of the Child and the 2013 ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children.

Data collection, analysis, dissemination and research on violence against children

82. In 2014, the Lao Statistics Bureau and the NCMC conducted a national household survey on violence against children. This study, published in 2016, is a first for Lao PDR and provides national population-based data on the magnitude and nature of physical, sexual and emotional violence against children, and its underlying risk and protective factors. It identifies the health and a social consequence associated with violence against children and assesses the knowledge and utilization of health and welfare services available for child victims of violence. The findings of the study will provide much-needed evidence to guide Government, development partners and INGOs in developing, improving and enhancing strategies to identify, prevent and respond to violence against children as part of a larger, multi-sectoral approach to child protection.

Cooperation and technical assistance

83. In October 2014, Government welcomed the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Ms. Marta Santos Pais, for a visit to Lao PDR. During the visit, a roundtable discussion was held with National Assembly members, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), NCMC and other interested stakeholders, on the draft Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children, as well as a meeting with the Steering Committee of the National Study on Violence against Children.

C. Abuse and neglect (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 48)

Cases and extent of violence, abuse and neglect

84. In Lao PDR, there is no national information management system that systematically collects data on incidents or trends of abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect against children, nor on activities currently in place to protect children. However, the national Violence against Children Survey was a first step at better understanding the patterns, circumstances and contributing factors of physical, emotional and sexual violence against children. The data from this survey, along with the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children and the National Plan of Action on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children (2014-2020), will allow for the development of detailed priority actions that are time-bound and costed to support the implementation of the National Plan of Action.

Recovery, counseling and reintegration of child victims

85. CPNs, established at the provincial, district and village levels, have been trained to prevent and respond to child abuse, neglect and exploitation. In 2016, CPNs were available in 496 villages in 35 districts and 8 provinces with plans to expand the CPNs to 800 villages by 2020. The LWU Counseling and Protection Centers for Women and Children provide counseling services to women and children who encounter problems and participate in monitoring and following up support to victims of violence. In 2015, the counseling network covered 52 villages in 57 districts in 11 provinces and training, although limited due to lack of budget, has been provided to counselors in all provinces. A free of charge national counseling hotline service has been operating since 2011. Counselors who speak ethnic languages, such as Hmong, are available.

86. There has been increasing level of support for children aimed at counseling and reintegrating children into their family and community. In some villages, there are up to eight units of support comprised of a CPN, a Counseling Unit, a Child Mediation Unit, a Committee on Healthcare, an Education Development Committee, a Coordination Committee on Building Families and Villages without Violence against Children, a Security and Defense Unit and a Committee on Preventing and Managing Disaster. All of these units have a responsibility and role to play in protecting and assisting children who

are victims or offenders and in coordinating with concerned sectors at the district and provincial levels.

87. In 2015, the Association for Development of Legal Education established the Legal Aid Committee for Vulnerable Women to provide poor women, including girls, with legal representation and advice. In 2015, it assisted two girls involved in rape cases.

Human, technical and financial resources

88. Lao PDR has made significant progress in establishing a legal and policy framework that provides a mandate to develop and support social work practice. The Social Welfare Strategic Development Plan (2011-2020) outlines the human resource and financial needs for building a social welfare system that responds to the issues of abuse and neglect of children. The NSEDP (2016-2020) explicitly calls for the establishment of a social work profession and builds on the previous NSEDP which called for the development of a social welfare system.

89. Despite efforts taken over past years to increase the number of social workers and improve the capacity of social work functions, the profession of social workers in Lao PDR is only just emerging, understanding of the importance of social work is limited and social work remains a weak area within the social welfare sector. The number of social workers remains low, follow up support to children and families is limited, as is technical and financial support. However, concrete plans are in place to address these weaknesses through the development of a short and long-term strategy to strengthen social work functions at different levels of the child protection system and within the social welfare sector as a whole.

90. The MoLSW and the National University of Laos have taken steps to strengthen the number and capacity of social workers across the country, including through the development and delivery of a four-week para-professional social work training course. Recognising the need to further strengthen professional social work education, the Faculty of Social Sciences launched a four-year Bachelor of Applied Arts in Social Work program in 2010, aligned with internationally recognized social work curricula. Since 2015, 509 students (251 female) graduated from the program, 18 of whom were recruited by MoLSW and 1 by NCMC.

91. The 2015 review of social work practices pointed to the lack of financial resources to support the development of social work practice and a cadre of social workers as a key challenge. Funding constraints ranged from a lack of funds, financial forecasting and planning, allocation of budget resources, and support for activities critical for performing job functions. Provincial and district levels do not currently control the budget and there is no local social work fund to support work at district level. The Three-Builds Ordinance will ultimately allow local authority to make decisions with regards to budget, personnel and development plans, which should allow for an improvement in the recruitment, hiring and deployment of social workers.

92. Counseling centers also face challenges due to a lack of financial resources and capacity of staff members to protect and assist victims. Only a few Counseling Centers are able to provide services for the recovery and care of victims and there are no facilities where victims can be referred for long-term or comprehensive assistance. There is a limited budget for recovery, vocational training and educational support for victims and no funding to support victims after reintegration into their family or society.

Mandatory reporting for professionals working with or for children

93. Article 29 of the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children establishes a system of mandatory reporting whereby "individuals, legal entities or organizations that have found or seen the use of violence of women or children shall immediately notify or report the incident". Medical doctors, other health care professionals, teachers, professors, caregivers or other professionals who have seen or know about violence against children must notify or report this to their own organization or to the police. If an organization receives a report, they must cooperate with the CPN or the Committee

for Protection and Assistance of Children to intervene in promptly protecting and assisting the child.

94. However, it is unclear to what extent cases of abuse are systematically reported in practice. Reporting and referral services to help child victims of violence require strengthened institutional mechanisms. To make the reporting system effective, public awareness of violence — especially gender-based violence — and its impact also need to be raised.

VI. Family environment and alternative care

A. Family environment (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 42)

95. The Social Welfare Development Plan commits Government to expand CPNs to each village nationwide. There are currently 496 villages with a CPN, an increase from 175 CPNs in 2010. A booklet was published and disseminated nation-wide to encourage villages without a CPN to establish one. Moreover, with the support of development partners, Government is strengthening existing CPNs and establishing new networks in additional villages. These networks will be further supported to prevent, identify, report, refer and assist children 'at risk' or in situations of harm and document best practices and lessons learned. CPNs perform an essential task at community level, but as they are composed of community volunteers, rather than full-time paid child protection professionals or social workers, they are limited in their capacity and effectiveness. In order to fully prevent and respond to child protection needs, family-support and community-based child protection services still need to be developed with technical and financial support.

96. In 2015, the MoLSW, with support from UNICEF, completed a comprehensive assessment of the child and family welfare system, which maps and defines the different components, roles and responsibilities of the child family welfare system. The assessment identified the key bottlenecks and opportunities in the delivery of child and family welfare services to all children, with special consideration for children that are 'at risk' or in situations of significant harm, including children with disabilities. The assessment recommended a participatory approach, including public consultations, in the development of a strengthened social welfare system for children and their families. It also recommended a clear identification of the roles and responsibilities of the formal and informal systems to address child protection issues and the provision of detailed categories of assistance.

97. The paraprofessional training social work training course developed by the MoLSW and the National University of Laos, with UNICEF support, includes modules on human rights, child rights and laws related to child protection. The CRC has been integrated into the training module on child-friendly investigation procedures for training police officials, prosecutors, lawyers and judges. The training module was also adapted and integrated into the training curricula at the National Police Academy and the Judicial Research and Training Institute.

B. Children deprived of a family environment (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 44)

98. Lao PDR is making strides towards developing a legal and regulatory framework in line with the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010). In 2012, the MoLSW organized two meetings, with support from UNICEF, to raise awareness and sensitize representatives from various Governmental sectors about the rights of children without parental care and the importance of providing protection and assistance for these children in line with the CRC and the UN Guidelines. The MoLSW also organized joint field visits for representatives from MoH, MoES and Ministry of Public Security (MoPS) as well as the members of the Committee for Protection and Assistance of Children to visit

alternative care arrangements, including boarding schools, SOS Children's Villages and CPNs in four provinces.

99. The MoLSW, with UNICEF support, is preparing to conduct a rapid situation assessment of children without parental care in Lao PDR in late 2016. The assessment will directly inform how Government proceeds to prioritize further research needs and collect quantitative and qualitative disaggregated data on children without parental care, to initiate a dialogue across sectors to develop guidelines to protect children that are not in the care of their parents or no longer able to live in the care of their parents, in line with the UN Guidelines, establish a mechanism to ensure the periodic review of children and adherence to standards in alternative care settings, and inform, which social protection and preventative mechanisms and strategies can be put in place to prevent the separation of children from their parents.

100. SOS Children's Villages have been established in 6 provinces. The support provided varies according to the needs of the local population, such as temporary care for malnourished children or care for children who can no longer be cared for by their families. From 2011-2016, Friends International provided services, such as shelter and education, to 11,254 children living on the streets.

101. There has been progress made in the organizational structures that provide regular periodic monitoring of childcare settings. The Committee on Protection and Assistance to Children and village administrative authorities monitor and review the implementation of alternative care to ensure that children are receiving sufficient care and protection, that children's rights are being respected at all stages within care settings and that priority is given to family and community relationships. The provincial and district levels monitor and inspect childcare facilities on a continuous basis to prevent violence against children.

102. The National Plan of Action on Violence (2014-2020) proposes a project on the prevention of violence against children in childcare facilities that would involve training staff working in childcare facilities to ensure regular monitoring and inspection. It also recommends that inspections of child care facilities are regular and performed by an independent body, which is granted the right to conduct inspections with no advance notice to privately interview children and officers and investigate all alleged violence while respecting the right to privacy of the child.

C. Adoption (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 46), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 24)

103. The Adoption Decree strengthened the legal framework for both national and inter-country adoptions and complies with the substantive provisions of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of on Inter-country Adoption, not yet ratified by Lao PDR. The moratorium on inter-country adoptions from Lao PDR remains in force.

104. The Decree calls for the establishment of teams at the central, provincial and district level who are responsible for supervising and monitoring both domestic and international adoptions. A management and monitoring organization with representatives from various sectors of Government is to be established. The Justice sector will act as the focal point for coordination amongst the different sectors. The district level is responsible for placement assessment and parental screening.

105. A plan is currently under development that would allow for the establishment of baby boxes at hospitals.

106. Lao PDR has not yet ratified the Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoption. Although it has been studying the possibility of ratifying the Convention, it has been focusing on improving its internal implementation mechanisms and establishing monitoring mechanisms for international adoptions.

VII. Disability, basic health and welfare

A. Children with disabilities (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 50)

107. The MoLSW reports that 8% of children aged 2-9 have at least one reported disability. Child disability rates are as high as 11.5% amongst those living in rural areas without road access, children whose mothers have no education, children from the poorest quintile households and children of the Khmou ethnic group. The wealthier groups have noticeably lower child disability rates as most causes of child disability are preventable if the family has good health care and nutrition and the knowledge and means to reduce the likelihood of accidents. The MoH notes that most cases of disability amongst children are due to UXO, injuries, pregnancy, delivery and childhood illnesses.

108. The National Committee for People with Disabilities and the Elderly is tasked to study, propose and adopt State policies and measures to protect, promote, assist, rehabilitate and support persons with disabilities and coordinate activities with governmental Ministries and local authorities. Committees for Persons with Disabilities have been established at the provincial and district levels. The Decree on Persons with Disabilities (2014) outlines the rights of persons with disabilities in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). A National Policy, a National Strategy and a National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities are currently being drafted.

Inclusion of children with disabilities

109. Government has adopted numerous key policies and action plans which promote inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system such as the ESDP (2011-2015), National Policy for Inclusive Education (2010), and National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education (2011-2015). The MoES is piloting a strengthened module on teaching children with disabilities. A national plan of action for learners with disabilities and a national rehabilitation and inclusive health strategic plan are under development.

110. In practice, it remains difficult for children with disabilities to attend school and drop-out rates for these students remains high. During the consultation with children, they noted that children with disabilities have limited access to school and health services due to the scarcity of infrastructures, distance and costs related to services. They recommended that better infrastructures be provided for children with disabilities so that they can access schools.

111. There is little understanding of, and information available about the rights of children with disabilities to access mainstream education in practice. Capacity of teachers to support children with disabilities in mainstream schools is low, and there is a lack of resources for schools. There is also limited training and support for teachers in inclusive education. The high pupil-to-teacher ratio further reduces the ability of teachers to support children with different learning styles, including children with disabilities. Special schools are still viewed as the most appropriate places for children with disabilities by many teachers and families.

Qualitative and quantitative data on children with disabilities

112. At present, there is limited data on disability in Lao PDR. The National Commission for People with Disabilities is tasked with coordinating with the MoPI and other relevant bodies to conduct surveys to gather statistical data on persons with disabilities nationwide and to provide this data to Government and private sector bodies wishing to use it. The MoES strengthened the Education Management Information System to collect data on children with disabilities and reported that 12% of children in schools had a disability in 2015. For the first time, questions on disability status were included in the 2015 PHC. Detailed age related results have yet to be released, but amongst the population 5 years and over, the overall prevalence of disabilities was 2.8%, with 2.5% in urban areas, 2.9% in rural areas and 3.3% in rural areas without roads.

Ratification of OP CRPD

113. Government submitted its initial report on the CRPD in May 2016. Lao PDR intends to concentrate its efforts on the effective and successful implementation of the CRPD as a first priority and will consider ratification of the Optional Protocol in the future.

B. Health and access to health services (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 52)

114. The Strategy and Planning Framework for the Integrated Package of Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health (MNCH) (2009-2015) outlined a unified framework to guide stakeholders in designing, implementing and evaluating maternal, neonatal, child health, immunization and nutrition programs. Government has committed to strengthening the health system through the Health Sector Reform strategy (2013-2025) with a focus on strengthening human resource capacity and improving health sector financing, the governance, organization, management of the health system, health service delivery, hospital management, the overall monitoring and evaluation framework and the Health Information System. The quality and deployment of health staff needs special attention. This will involve prioritizing the deployment of skilled health workers in rural and remote areas, strengthening the capacity of health professions education and training, and addressing specific skill gaps remaining due to mismatches between training programs and demand by provincial health services.

Free primary health care and recruitment of medical personnel

115. Government rolled out free maternal, neonatal and child health care in 2014 that exempts pregnant women and children under age five from fees related to deliveries and health care at all health centers and public hospitals. Government also initiated Health Equity Fund schemes that aim to help the poorest families who are unable to afford health insurance premiums. Benefits include medical services in state facilities, drugs, supplies, laboratory tests and other costs associated with assessing health facilities. The current Health Equity Fund scheme also includes basic services for mothers and children, such as antenatal care.

116. Financial barriers still impede access to health services. Improving health sector financing will require increasing and securing sufficient domestic resources for health, removing financial barriers through Health Equity Fund schemes and free maternal, neonatal and child health care. Government's social protection schemes for health are being merged into a National Health Insurance Scheme, aimed at moving towards universal health coverage, which could potentially improve access to health care. The NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to increase coverage of health insurance to 80%.

117. Children expressed the opinion that the lack of a health care center in their community and the distance to an existing health care center impedes access to health services in remote areas. Although there is still an undersupply of health providers, Government has developed a number of plans and strategies to respond to the shortage and uneven distribution of skilled health care providers through the National Strategy for Human Resources for Health (2010-2020), the Decree on financial incentives for attracting and retaining staff in rural and remote settings (2013) and the National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (2016-2025). Health care posts increased by 4,500 in 2014-2015, which are positive indications of progress. There is however an imbalance in budget allocation that leads to 40% of the total Government health budget going to nine hospitals and health institutes located in the VTE Capital. District health centers continue to suffer from a shortage of qualified health staff.

Training for medical personnel and equipment and medication for district hospitals

118. The MNCH (2009-2015) noted the need for a skilled health workforce. The Skilled Birth Attendance Development Plan was a major achievement as it significantly increased the training and deployment of community midwives, from 88 to 1784 and quality of training was improved. Sufficient deployment of midwives to the health centers has not yet been achieved, as 608 health centers out of 980 did not have a midwife in 2014. At least

one health worker per health center (approximately 850) has been trained on effective vaccine management and approximately 191 health workers and 1,302 LWUs have been equipped with knowledge, skills and resources to promote positive nutrition practices and care-seeking during pregnancy, postpartum and in the first years of a child's life.

Infant, child and maternal mortality

119. There have been significant declines in maternal and child mortality. According to the 2015 PHC, infant mortality decreased from 70 per 1,000 live births in 2005 to 57 per 1,000 in 2015. The under-five mortality rate decreased from 98 per 1,000 live births in 2005 to 86 per 1,000 in 2015. These declines are due to socio-economic improvements, the implementation of the Health Sector Reforms, more health staff deployed at the grassroots level, increased national funding, and better availability and accessibility of health services. Improvements in maternal and child care practices such as exclusive breastfeeding, improved utilization of maternal, newborn and child health services, immunizations, antenatal and delivery care and poverty reduction have also played a role in declining maternal and child mortality rates. The NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to decrease infant mortality of under-one to 30 per 1,000 live births and the under-five child mortality rate to 45 per 1,000 live births.

120. Most under-five deaths in Lao PDR are due to common preventable and treatable conditions including pneumonia (14%), diarrhea (12%) and perinatal conditions. Undernutrition is responsible for about half of all deaths. A large proportion of these deaths could be avoided by using improved drinking water and sanitation, and better hygiene practices. Care-seeking behavior by families is central to improving the health of children, but only about 25% of the population seeks care on a timely basis. People in rural areas tend to make far less use of public health services than those in the urban areas, and the lack of staff, drugs and long distances to facilities discourages use.

121. Efforts to reduce child mortality further will require improving the existing health services coverage and ensuring the sustainability of preventive maternal and child health interventions, such as immunization, micronutrient supplementation and mass deworming. To this end, integrated health outreach services should be strengthened as the main strategy for reaching the most vulnerable groups. All these will require higher level of investments in health.

122. There have also been significant declines in maternal mortality with the 2015 PHC reporting a drop from 405 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2005 to 206 maternal deaths per 100,000 in 2015. The causes of maternal death are hemorrhage (29%), obstructed labor, pregnancy-induced hypertension (15%), infections (17%) and embolism (12%). An estimated 20% of maternal deaths are due to malnutrition. The actual cause of these deaths have their roots in poverty, women's status, lack of education, cultural traditions and taboos, weak infrastructure and weak health system — as most deaths are avoidable with skilled care and timely access to emergency obstetric care. The NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to decrease the maternal mortality ratio to 200 per 100,000 live births.

123. To further reduce maternal mortality, interventions related to increased investments in health and health sector reform will be necessary. Within the health sector reform framework, special attention needs to be given to improving the reach and quality of health care education, improving the quality of health care services, increasing access to well-equipped and well-stocked facilities and ensuring effective referral systems. Interventions beyond the health sector are also necessary for tackling the challenge of high maternal mortality. Female and male education, behavior change interventions, roads and transport to health facilities, and harmful cultural traditions all need to be addressed. Social assistance measures should not only remove financial barriers to health care and facility delivery, but should also be adequate in protecting women from overwork during pregnancy. A national multi-sectoral youth policy is needed to inform and educate youth on adolescent pregnancies, early marriage and other issues, and explicitly addresses access to contraceptives for unmarried youth.

Provision of equipment and supplies to district hospitals

124. In order to improve the management of medical products and technology, the MNCH (2009-2015) pointed to the need for adequately constructed health facilities with functional amenities, including water, sanitation, and essential drugs, supplies and equipment. Health facilities need standardized procurement and disbursement mechanisms so that materials are ordered and delivered in a timely fashion. A medical equipment management system that would assist in improving procurement and distribution is under development.

Strategies and programs to reduce child malnutrition

125. A National Nutrition Committee was created in 2013 to provide overall leadership and guidance for the coordination of the National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (2010-2015). Realization of this Plan was hindered by disjointed implementation, a failure to move in a united direction, a lack of focus, budgetary constraints and lack of support from development partners. Children felt that they had limited access to information on nutrition and to nutritious food in rural areas.

126. The updated National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and a Plan of Action (2016-2020) aim to reduce malnutrition rates amongst women and children and will operate in association with the NSEDP (2016-2020). The amended strategy focuses on achieving sufficient food consumption and addresses improvements to the safety and diversity of foods consumed. It emphasizes a multi-sectoral approach and acknowledges the need to expand resources and increase support from development partners. Guidelines on nutrition have been developed and training on the guidelines is being provided to health care centers at the provincial level. Government is also in the process of developing a new Nutrition Law and a school lunch strategy to implement the School Lunch Policy (2014). Currently, a school meals program provides a nutritious snack to schoolchildren in 1,500 schools across 7 provinces.

127. Improved availability of data and analysis for policy and programming is anticipated from the 2015 Anthropometric tag-on survey to the National Immunization Coverage survey, the 2015 Sub-national Food and Nutrition Security survey and the 2015 Stakeholder and Nutrition mapping.

Reproductive health services

128. The National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH) (2016-2025) uses the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as one of its overarching principles. The National Reproductive Health Policy, Family Planning Action Plan (2014-2015 and onward), the Midwifery Improvement Plan (2016-2020), and the National Emergency Obstetric Care Action Plan (2013-2017) also provide a framework for maternal and reproductive health.

129. One of the objectives of the RMNCH is to increase utility and acceptance of quality reproductive health information and services amongst all women and men of reproductive age, including adolescents, young people, and those living in poor or rural areas, regardless of marital status. It aims to increase the contraceptive prevalence rate for women of reproductive age to 70%, reduce the unmet need for contraception to 8% and increase the availability of reproductive health information and services that are responsive to the needs of young people.

130. Antenatal care (ANC) is a critical entry point for women and children in the health care system, but only about 1 in 3 women receive care from trained personnel, and regional disparities are striking. ANC coverage was highest in the central region and urban areas, and lowest in the southern region and in rural areas with no roads. Only 16% of women in the poorest quintile received ANC services, compared with over 87% of women in the richest quintile. Cultural practices and beliefs as well as poor physical access also mitigate against women seeking timely care in pregnancy and, for complications, will often seek traditional healers first which results in delays, which can be fatal.

131. The number of births attended by skilled personnel is still too low. While more than two-thirds of births in urban areas are delivered by skilled trained health workers, including trained community birth attendants, this drops to about 15% in rural areas and to less than 3% in rural areas without roads. Most of these trained health workers, especially the community workers, lack the competency, authority, equipment and drugs to manage even simple complications. The RMNCH (2016-2025) aims to increase use and quality of pregnancy and delivery care particularly for those living in poor and rural areas. The Plan aims for 80% of pregnant women to receive at least four quality ANC checks and deliver with a skilled birth attendant, and for 70% of pregnant women to deliver in a health facility and receive postnatal care within two days of birth. The Plan also aims to improve the quality and use of emergency obstetric care in better functioning systems by increasing the quality, availability and accessibility of basic and comprehensive obstetric care including safe abortion care. The LWU has run campaigns to encourage women to give birth in hospitals and health centers.

132. At the provincial level, the health sector conducted awareness-raising on reproductive health, family planning, preventing unwanted pregnancies and risks of early pregnancy. Awareness-raising activities targeting sex workers and construction workers have been run on sexually transmitted diseases. Schools conducted awareness-raising activities on safe sex, prevention, and the risks and impacts of sexually transmitted diseases. The MoH and MoES integrated a module on preventing communicable diseases into the school curriculum.

Vaccination rates

133. Vaccination coverage has been steadily increasing due to vaccination campaigns targeting children between the ages of one and fifteen. In 2014, a nation-wide measles-rubella immunization campaign reached an estimated 1.6 million children (97% coverage). Government used this opportunity to provide Vitamin A supplements and de-worming tablets as well as provide routine vaccines to children who may have otherwise missed out. Nearly 690,000 children under-five received Vitamin A supplements (94%) and over 614,000 children under-five (95%) benefitted from deworming. In 2014, Lao PDR received certification from the World Health Organization that it had eliminated maternal and neonatal tetanus.

134. In 2015, Government launched a multi-antigen vaccination campaign aimed to prevent further diphtheria transmission after a recent outbreak, to ensure that polio immunity levels were maintained and to bring the Japanese encephalitis vaccination to Lao children for the first time. Approximately 900,000 children were vaccinated against one or more of these diseases.

135. Government has developed a number of strategies to address vaccinations including the National Immunization Program Comprehensive Multi-Year Plan (2016-2020) and the National Integrated Communication Strategy and Action Plan for Expanding Immunization Coverage (2015-2020). The RMNCH (2016-2025) includes a strategic objective to protect all children under-five from vaccine preventable diseases through immunization and the NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to increase coverage of vaccinations to 95%. The MoH has developed and tested new micro-planning guidelines built on the Reaching Every Community principles for mother and children health service delivery to ensure underserved populations receive immunizations and other outreach services.

Insecticide treated mosquito nets

136. Although malaria diagnosis and treatment is on track with over 90% of cases with confirmed malaria being treated, bednet coverage needs to be increased. The MoH has an on-going program to distribute long-lasting bed nets in malaria endemic areas as part of Government strategy to eradicate malaria. The RMNCH (2016-2020) includes promoting the use of insecticide-treated bed nets from prenatal to postnatal.

C. Breastfeeding (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 54)

137. The rate of exclusive breastfeeding amongst infants under the age of 6 months remains low. The LSIS showed that 40% of children under the age of 6 months were exclusively breastfed and 68% were predominately breastfed. By the end of 6 months however, only 10% of infants were being exclusively breastfed.

138. Maternity leave was recently extended to five months and women are entitled to an hour a day of rest to feed a child during the first year after birth. The National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (2010-2015) promoted early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and encouraged continued breastfeeding up to two years or beyond. The National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action (2016-2020) aims to promote exclusive breastfeeding for children from birth up until the age of six months with a target of 50% by 2020. In order to achieve this objective, the Plan calls for the improvement and enforcement of legislation concerning the marketing of breast milk substitutes and food for infants and children, the creation and implementation of plans to promote exclusive breastfeeding for children from birth up to the age of six months, and the training of medical staff at all levels, including village doctors, village health volunteers and village LWU units so that they promote breastfeeding. The RMNCH (2016-2025) aims to increase the proportion of infants being exclusively breastfed from 40 to 60% by 2025.

139. A review of the nutrition legal framework and the monitoring of violations of the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk were conducted. A section on the Code was included in the Law on Nutrition, an important step forward in strengthening national legislation. Government is committed to developing a Law on the Code of Marketing of Beast Milk Substitutes to protect breastfeeding.

140. In 2012-2013, an exclusive breastfeeding media promotion strategy together with community-level counseling was implemented nationwide in target areas. These interventions were modeled on a strategy implemented in 2009-2010 that is credited with increasing the country's exclusive breastfeeding rate from 26% in 2006 to 40% in 2012. Lao language stand-alone materials promoting exclusive breastfeeding have been developed for distribution to health centers (posters, booklets etc.) and the LWU has conducted campaigns to educate women on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding.

D. Harmful practices (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 56)

141. The LSIS generated some data on early marriage disaggregated by age, sex, and province. The survey showed that 45% of women age 20-49 were married before the age of 18. In rural areas, almost twice as many women were married before 18. Only 2% of women with some education were married before 18. One in four young women (25%) age 15-19 were married with a higher proportion of those young women coming from rural areas (30%). Nearly 6 in 10 women in Hmong-Mien headed households marry before the age of 18; the highest amongst all ethno-linguistic groups. The patterns of marriage before 18 for men are largely the same as amongst women. The percent of young men age 15-19 currently married was 9%. Only 3% of men with some education were married before age 18. The PHC2015 showed that 18% of girls and 7% of boys aged 15-19 were married.

142. The Family Law, which does not allow marriage before the age of eighteen, needs to be enforced. Children highlighted that in remote areas, child marriage is still common. The PCMC's also noted that much still remains to be done in this area, particularly in term of awareness-raising to change traditional beliefs. Although there is no prohibition against married girls attending school, most drop out. The NPAMC (2016-2018) includes the objective to decrease the early child marriage ratio.

E. Standard of living (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 58)

143. Lao PDR achieved the MDG on safe water and sanitation. In 2015, approximately 76% of the population had access to improved sources of drinking water and 71% had improved sanitation. The rural-urban gap narrowed regarding access to improved water

sources, but disparities remain. The inequities are far greater in sanitation than in water coverage. Investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is generally inadequate. Sanitation, in particular, requires more attention and investment with dedicated funding from Government and development partners.

144. The amended Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2011) sets out the principles, rules and measures relating to hygiene disease prevention and health promotion. The Law stipulates the importance of hygiene to prevent diseases and promote health throughout society and sets out elements of personal, family and community hygiene, hygiene of drinking and domestic water, food and consumption goods, and hygiene of buildings, hotels, guesthouses restaurants, schools and other educational institutions, health care facilities, labor and occupation, production, construction, maintenance sites, industries, public places, markets, funerals, environmental health and places of detention.

145. In terms of policy frameworks, the National Plan of Action for Rural Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (2012) identifies five strategic directions necessary to improve performance: equity for all rural populations; sustainability of rural water and sanitation services and hygienic behavior; shared responsibilities between key stakeholder institutions and actors; recognition of different approaches required for rural water, sanitation and hygiene; and the need for innovation and change. Elimination of open defecation and access to safe drinking water are included in the Plan. The NPASH (2016-2020) aims to increase access to potable water to 90% of the population and to have and use latrines to 80%.

146. The MoH and the MoES, with long-term support from UNICEF, have been promoting water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). WASH is an integral part of the Multi-Sectoral Food and Nutrition Security Action Plan (2014-2020). The Department for Hygiene and Health Promotion, under the MoH, is taking the lead in developing an overarching WASH Policy and Strategy incorporating rural and urban WASH for the first time. A WASH Policy Technical Team was formed in 2014, including all the line ministries, to draw together these sectors under one overarching policy. Linkages to research institutes within Government (such as NIRI) are being facilitated to support analysis and research required for developing a comprehensive WASH policy and to raise the profile and importance of WASH in national socio-economic development.

147. Changing behavior with regards to open defecation and hygiene is still a major challenge. In order to promote proper hygiene, the National Committee for Nutrition has been promoting the '3 clean' principles: drinking boiled water, eating cooked food and using latrines. A training package on community dialogue for rural water supply and hygiene promotion has been revised and the LWU has used campaigns to educate households and communities on proper sanitation and hygiene practices.

148. The revised National School Health Policy aims to promote the health of students and teachers through interventions to improve water and sanitation provision in schools and to promote positive hygiene behavior and life skills. The Education Quality Standard (EQS) for Primary and Secondary Schools (2013) mentions the need for sufficient toilets. Strategies to promote good hygiene practices in schools include the launching of the "Raising Clean Hand" booklet and the celebration of International Hand Washing Day. In 2014, MoES and MoH, with support from UNICEF, constructed WASH facilities in 221 primary schools in educationally disadvantaged districts by which 30,000 school children, including 16,500 girls directly benefitted. Sanitation facilities and hand washing stations were designed to be user-friendly and accessible to all, including adolescent girls, small children and children with disabilities.

149. In 2014, approximately 43,000 rural people achieved access to improved source of water through construction of hand pump boreholes and gravity fed systems under the leadership of MoH. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Committees were established during the preconstruction phase using the national community dialogue process to promote ownership in the process. NNHP (2016-2020) calls for awareness-raising of the community on sanitation and clean water supplies and further encourages the utilization of latrines in remote areas to ensure broad use of clean water and sanitation facilities.

150. Recent gains in rural water and sanitation coverage are due to investments by Government and development partners, but have mostly impacted non-poor rural households, living close to roads and markets. Given rural poverty levels, these rapid gains may not be sustained. The causes that contribute to low access to water and sanitation are: scarce and expensive physical components and low allocation from Government; poor municipal capacity for urban services; traditional attitudes and knowledge that contribute to poor sanitation behaviors and little genuine demand for quality facilities; low or non-involvement of village governments, communities and households in planning for water supply and sanitation; and plans and strategies that do not prioritize investments nor respond to the particular needs of different population groups, especially poor households.

F. Alcohol and substance abuse (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 60)

151. The National Drug Control Master Plan (2006-2015) addressed aspects of alternative economic development and poverty reduction for ex-poppy cultivating communities, criminal justice responses to drug trafficking, and drug demand reduction and rehabilitation. The EQS includes promotion of life skills on protection from narcotic drugs. "Strong and Drug-Free" schools are being piloted in two provinces.

152. Drug and alcohol use appear to be growing problems. Some provinces have adjusted their Strategic Plans to combat substance abuse, implement laws and regulations that prohibit selling/buying illegal substances and other types of drugs that are dangerous to the health of children such as alcohol and cigarettes. In order to protect children from substance abuse and to prevent children from using illegal substances, all provinces have conducted awareness-raising activities on substance issues and the impact of substance abuse. The lack of capacity and budget has prevented more from being done to combat these issues. A recent Prime Minister instruction prohibits serving children beer and alcohol near schools. There have also been recent discussions between Government and tobacco companies about putting the risks of tobacco use on cigarette packages.

153. The MoH launched the Young People Stay Away from Drugs project with the participation of over 1800 children in the VTE Capital and two provinces. The project gives students the opportunity to join creative activities, such as cultural performances or sports activities, after school hours. The NPAMR (2016-2020) aims to increase the development of this project in at least one school in every province. Although there are no programs targeting young people that provide drug or alcohol support services, a number of drug treatment and rehabilitation centers operate in Lao PDR that are used by young people. The centers operate detoxification programs, rehabilitation and vocational training services.

154. The National Drug Control Master Plan (2016-2020) provides a long-term vision and strategy to combat drug production, trafficking and usage as well as related criminal activities. The Plan addresses drug use and reducing harm associated with drug use and preventing drug use before it begins through nationwide civic awareness campaigns. The NPAMR (2016-2020) includes an objective to improve the protection and assistance system for children addicted to drugs by training trainers at the provincial and district level to disseminate, monitor and support children addicted to drugs.

VIII. Education, leisure and cultural activities

A. Education, including vocational training and guidance (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 62), (CRC/C/OPAC/LAO/CO/1, para. 17)

155. A number of policy and planning instruments have guided education sector interventions including Education Sector Development Framework (2009-2015), Education for All National Plan for Action (2003-2015), USDP (2011-2015) and National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education (2011-2015). EQS for Primary Schools, which build on Schools of Quality, were adopted in 2013 and are being applied in 88 districts. MoES, with support from UN agencies conducted an impact assessment of the revised

Education Law. ESDP (2016-2020) recognizes the importance of equity and learning for all and sets priorities on issues of school dropout, poverty and repetition, as well as improving the quality of education.

156. The quality and use of education data for sector planning and reporting was strengthened through expansion of the web-based "Lao EDUInfo". The total budget for education and sports increased to 17% of total Government expenditure in 2016 to improve and develop the education infrastructure and improve teaching/learning.

Access to compulsory education

157. Primary education has made much progress in terms of access for both girls and boys. In 2015, the primary school net enrolment rate increased to 98.5% from 94.1% in 2011. The NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to increase primary enrollment to 100%. Gender parity index for gross enrollment has improved with a .97 ratio between boys and girls at the primary level in 2015. Disparities still remain between girls and boys, urban and rural areas, especially rural, off-road communities, and amongst ethnic groups. Reaching these excluded children and enabling their families to help realize their children's right to a good quality education is a significant challenge.

158. Although the rural infrastructure has improved significantly over the last decade, distance to school and incomplete schools which do not offer all grades are still constraints in remote areas. Urban communities also have school facilities that are better equipped than those in rural areas. Language barriers for ethnic children who do not speak Lao are a challenge and has been attributed to non-enrolment, poor learning outcomes, high repetition rates, high daily absenteeism and high drop-out rates. Children living in remote areas without road access may be admitted to ethnic boarding schools, which are located in each province, where they are provided with support and a per diem from Government.

159. To address these disparities, NSEDP (2016-2020) seeks to extend education opportunities to children and adolescents in remote areas to fulfill the policy on compulsory education at primary level and secondary level as a foundation for the development and upgrading of labor skills. The Child Schooling Opportunity Expansion Program aims to extend education opportunities to rural and remote areas and the ESDP (2016-2020) seeks to support all children to have access to complete primary education in their hometown or nearby village.

160. The National Education System Reform Strategy (2006-2015) extended basic education from eight to nine years by adding an additional year to lower secondary, making a total of twelve years of schooling. The revised Education Law increases the number of years of compulsory schooling from five to nine years. Steadily increasing numbers of primary school graduates have increased demand for secondary education, but overall participation remains low. The lower secondary gross enrolment rate increased from 62.9% in 2011 to 78.1% in 2015 and the upper secondary increased to 45.8%, which meant an overall increase in secondary gross enrolment rates to 64.6%.

161. Enrolments drop off significantly and gender disparities widen at each higher level of schooling. The ratio between girls and boys is 0.91 at the lower secondary level and .84 at the upper secondary level. NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to increase net enrollment of lower secondary school students to 90% and upper secondary school students to 80%.

162. There has also been progress in eliminating secondary costs. Government provided block grants to all primary schools nationwide to discourage school authorities from asking parents to contribute towards their children's education. The allocation of school block grants is made per student regardless of the location or size of the school. Isolated rural schools receive a "remote allowance" which seeks to compensate for the higher costs associated with their functioning. Government also has a village block grant program to support poor families to send their children to school. A textbook management program, under the leadership of the Department of Finance, provided all students (over 390,000) in grade one and two with textbooks for the 2014-2015 academic year alongside teacher guidebooks for these same grades. Under the Education for All: Fast Track Initiative (2010-2014), Government initiated a school meal programs in 56 priority districts.

School attendance and completion of compulsory education

163. Through targeted legislation, planning, programs and projects to address school dropouts, Government managed to reduce the primary school dropout rate by 2.6% since 2011. Actual implementation saw the primary school dropout rate reduced from 7.8% in 2011 to 5.2% in 2015. In lower secondary school, the dropout rate decreased from 11% in 2011 (10.6% for girls and 12.3% for boys) to 7.7% in 2015 (6.7% for girls and 8.5% for boys) and amongst upper secondary school from 10% in 2011 (9.8% for girls and 10.3% for boys) to 4.9% (4.7% for girls and 5.1% for boys) in 2015. The primary school survival rate increased from 67.1% in 2011 to 78.3% in 2015 and the transition rate from primary to lower secondary increased from 87.6% in 2011 to 91.7% in 2015.

164. The reported causes for dropping out include insufficiency of teachers in remote rural areas, unavailability of schools (especially complete schools) in villages, the gap between the school year and local agricultural calendars, direct and indirect opportunity costs of schooling on families, quality and perceived relevance of education, and the need for children to work. Dropout rates are higher in rural schools that often have larger class sizes and shortages in teachers and learning resources. A lack of parental support and limited employment opportunities together with cultural factors that accept early marriage and a mostly domestic role for females have an impact on enrolment and drop-out rates amongst girls in rural areas.

165. Government is implementing several strategies to address school dropouts, particularly children from poor families and the poorest groups. These include expansion of lower secondary schools to remote areas, school feeding and food supplement programs in selected districts and provinces, ethnic boarding schools, dormitories for secondary schools, scholarships for poor students, literacy programs, non-formal education and school block grants.

166. NSEDP (2016-2020) aims to increase the proportion of students starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary school to 95%. NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to increase the survival rate in primary schools to 98%. ESDP (2016-2020) sets priorities on the issue of school drop-outs and repetition including supporting all children to have access to complete primary education in their hometown or nearby village, upgrading incomplete primary schools to become complete primary schools, providing school block grants, and supporting health and nutrition at schools.

167. In 2015, MoES and MoPI, with the support of UNICEF, conducted the Out of School Children Initiative which will assist in the identification of strategies by which the ESDP can ensure all children complete a full cycle of basic education. The Schools of Quality approach enlists Village Education Development Committees to actively work with parents to ensure that they send their children to school, and help address any barriers that may prevent them from studying. In 2015, the MoES conducted a study of Village Education Development Committees to better understand how community structures can be strengthened to support more children to stay in school and complete basic education.

Technical and vocational education and training

168. There is an urgent need for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) that is market-driven, affordable, and flexible, and for employment promotion policy, enterprise development and job creation, with better public employment services to match job seekers (or unemployed) and enterprises looking for labor. Less than 7% of students currently choose TVET and the ratio between girls and boys is 0.6. The Law on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2013) set out the rules and measures to train and develop the Lao labor force to respond to the needs of the Lao labor market. The NPAMC (2016-2020) aims to encourage 10% of students who completed lower secondary school to continue study at a vocational school.

169. Lao PDR has been participating in the Asian Development Bank-supported "Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project" which seeks to improve technical training to address skill shortages in construction and building, mechanical and machinery maintenance and repair, furniture making and basic business. Vocational training has since been expanded and improved in a number of provinces and a

policy is in place to provide allowances for students from poor families and remote areas. This has led to an increase in students studying at the vocational level.

170. The NSEDP (2016-2020) calls for an incentive policy to attract more students at the vocational level and to improve and modify the curriculum for vocational education to meet the socio-economic development needs in areas such as electrical, mining, industrial processing, handicrafts, mechanics and services.

Trained and qualified schoolteachers

171. According to the MoES, 27% of the country's teachers do not have sufficient qualifications for teaching, and there are 20,000 untrained teachers in the country, almost half at the primary level. This is a fundamental capacity gap, worsened by the lack of teaching and learning materials, especially in rural areas and communities without road access. It is not uncommon for remote schools to have neither textbooks nor teacher guides. The allocation of teachers varies across provinces and there are difficulties in attracting and maintaining qualified teachers in remote areas. Currently, poor, remote and multi-grade primary schools and teachers face the most daunting challenges, but have less qualified teachers, fewer resources, and less support from pedagogical advisors and district education boards.

172. Government has been promoting education quality and relevance through numerous programs. Interventions include the selection and reward of outstanding students, teacher training at all levels, and curriculum development and adaption to local needs. The Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan (2011-15) aimed to ensure that teachers receive continuous and systemic qualifications upgrading through pre- and in-service training. Under the Fast Track Initiative, the qualifications of existing primary and pre-primary teachers were upgraded and efforts were made to improve the supply of teachers to ethnic communities. In order to implement the EQS, the MoES developed guidelines for district education offices and schools, a manual and associated tools for the school self-assessment process and a manual on school quality standards assessment and accreditation.

173. The ESDP (2016-2020) aims to enhance the quality of teaching and learning by upgrading teacher qualifications, improving their methodology for single and multi-grades classes, building model schools, improving internal and external pedagogical advice, supporting sharing lessons learnt and helping each other within schools and school clusters and providing instruction materials. One of the priority strategies of the NSEDP (2016-2020) aims to deploy more primary and secondary teachers in rural areas. The NSEDP also aims to improve the quality of learning and teaching by improving the quality of teachers, improving learning-teaching tools, and building laboratories and other necessary facilities to focus less on learning by theory and more on learning by actual experimentation and practice.

Integration of human rights, in particular child rights, into the school curricula

174. Human rights and child rights have been integrated into the school curriculum at all levels.

IX. Special protection measures

A. Economic exploitation, including child labor (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 64)

175. The Child Labour Survey (2010), conducted by the MoLSW in cooperation with MoPI, revealed that 15% of children between the ages of 5-17 were economically active or working children. Two out of three child laborers were working in hazardous conditions and seven out of ten were working more than 49 hours per week. The majority of child laborers were working in rural areas. Children noted that they are being asked to work in or out of the family as a contribution to the household.

176. In compliance with ILO 138, the amended Labour Law sets the minimum age of employment at 14 years. The Law also permits the employment of children from 12 years of age in 'light work', defined as work that is not harmful to the health or development of a child and does not obstruct attendance at school or participation in professional guidance or vocational training. This allows for secondary students to work part-time and contribute to family income. However, in 2015 the Education Law was revised which increased the number of years of compulsory schooling from five to nine years. This means that the age of completion of compulsory education is once again higher than the minimum age of employment.

177. The Labour Law also introduced a new provision prohibiting hazardous work for all persons under 18 in compliance with ILO 182. This includes employment in activities, duties and locations that are unsafe, dangerous to the health, safety or morals of the child, forced labor, work to repay debts, human trafficking, trade or deception into the sex industry or solicitation of prostitution, photography or pornography, and trade or deception in the movement and production, transportation, possession of narcotics or addictive substances. Employers must keep records on youth employment including age and date of birth which must be provided to labor inspectors. Provincial authorities disseminated the Labour Law to youths, adolescents and students and are monitoring its implementation to ensure that children are paid and did not work over the defined working hours.

178. The National Strategy and Plan of Action on Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour (2014-2020) aims to enhance policies in education, training, health, social protection and employment to improve access of child laborers and vulnerable children to services and interventions, improve the quality and quantity of educational services to keep children in school, and mainstream child labor concerns into agriculture sector policies and interventions. It also recognizes the need for awareness-raising activities on the new law amongst workers, employers and the general public and institutionalized mandatory training on child labor for law enforcement officials, prosecutors, judges and labor inspectorates. The Plan aims to improve and institutionalize data collection on child labor and school attendance by developing a database and conducting a second National Child Labour Survey in 2020 to compare data over a ten-year period.

B. Sexual exploitation and abuse (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 66), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 28)

179. Given the illegal and hidden nature of sexual exploitation of children, little information is available. There is limited research or studies on sexual exploitation and a lack of baseline data on the scale and nature of sexual exploitation and abuse of children to inform policy and program development, as well as to measure the impact of interventions over time.

180. Combatting child sexual exploitation requires rigorous enforcement of existing laws. Commercial sex work is a criminal offence in Lao PDR, yet many sex workers are children and adolescents. Due to resource, capacity and coordination constraints, many of the provisions outlined in agreements related to sexual exploitation have not been implemented.

181. At the community level, CPNs play a key role in educating the public about sexual abuse. However, additional awareness-raising on sexual abuse is needed as deep-rooted social norms and attitudes make it difficult to intervene in sensitive matters, which are considered private even if harmful to children. INGOs, in cooperation with provincial-level Labour and Social Welfare agencies, have conducted awareness-raising campaigns amongst communities about the potential risks to children from human trafficking, sexual exploitation, criminal activity, drug abuse and violence. Village authorities, including the LWU, Lao Youth Union, CPN and Village Mediation Units, disseminate information by loudspeakers, written materials and radio programmes.

182. Under an initiative entitled "Project Childhood", AusAID supported a regional project to prevent children from becoming victims of sexual exploitation in travel and tourism by raising awareness and building community resilience. Under this project, a number of educational materials were developed for the tourism sector, community

representatives, parents and carers and children and young people. Training sessions and workshops were held with relevant stakeholders, including community police.

183. Beyond general awareness-raising initiatives, other services to identify children at risk of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation are limited. There are no professional social workers employed at the local level and staff at the village, district and provincial levels has not been trained to identify or respond to cases of abuse. An assessment of the child and family welfare system showed that child and family support services are limited (representing 1% of all reported prevention services) and available in only a few concentrated locations.

C. Sale, trafficking and abduction (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 68), (CRC/C/OPSC/LAO/CO/1, para. 10 & 38)

National legislation against trafficking in persons

184. Government gives priority to preventing and combatting trafficking in persons by developing policies, law, regulations and national plan of actions. The Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons defines the procedures and measures to be taken in terms of prevention, combatting trafficking, victim protection and assistance and measures to be taken against perpetrators. The National Plan of Action on Human Trafficking (2013-2015) was integrated into sectoral plans and a new National Plan of Action to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Persons is under development.

185. The National Anti-Human Trafficking Committee leads Government's response to trafficking by formulating policies, strategies, programs, plans and projects and by coordinating and cooperating with relevant sectors both nationally and internationally. The Anti-Human Trafficking Department, under the MoPS, and the Anti-Human Trafficking Division, under the provincial Police Office, coordinate and implement the plans, programs and projects within their areas of responsibilities.

186. Government is expanding its bi- and multi-lateral cooperation to combat human trafficking. In addition to earlier agreements with Thailand and Vietnam, a bilateral agreement between Lao PDR and China on cooperation to combat trafficking in persons, focusing on prevention, investigation of cases, protection of trafficked persons, capacity building and the establishment of liaison mechanisms in border areas was signed in 2014. A similar agreement between Lao PDR and Malaysia is under development. The ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2015) was signed by Lao PDR and is in the process being ratified.

187. Government allocates funding for anti-trafficking activities with additional assistance and contributions from national and international entities. In 2014, budget allocation for anti-trafficking measures was increased.

Investigate and prosecute all cases of sale and trafficking

188. The Law on Anti-Trafficking sets out procedures for dealing with reported cases of trafficking. Anti-impunity measures are included in the law with violators being subject to measures of re-education, punishment, civil or criminal proceedings depending on the gravity of the violation. Penal measures within the Law impose a sentence of fifteen to twenty years imprisonment and a fine for trafficking offences where the victims are children. In cases where the offender causes the victim to suffer from a lifetime incapacity or infection with HIV/AIDS, the punishment increases to life in prison and a fine. Victims also have the right to claim civil compensation during criminal proceedings.

189. Government increased its efforts to investigate trafficking offenses and prosecute and punish traffickers. The MoLSW reported that there were 126 girls and 8 boys who were victims of child trafficking in 2011, 125 girls and 9 boys in 2012, 71 girls and 7 boys in 2013, 115 girls and 0 boys in 2014, 78 girls and 2 boys in 2015 and 37 girls and 2 boys in 2016. The MoPS reported that between 2013-2015, 78 complaints of suspected trafficking were received with 125 victims (58 girls) under the age of 18. Court cases reportedly resulted in 35 convictions, an increase from 18 convictions in 2012.

190. The LWU has taken an active role in disseminating legislation at the local level and has established of a Center for Legal Advice for victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and violence.

Protect child victims and ensure access to assistance for their recovery and reintegration

191. The Law on Anti-Trafficking strengthens measures to protect and provide assistance to victims. In particular, child victims of trafficking have the right to safely continue to study in the school or educational institution where he or she has been attending or to attend a different school or educational institution. Child victims who cannot continue their education must be provided with professional or vocational training. Free health services are also provided to victims. The Law on Violence stipulates a series of protection and assistance to victims of all of forms of violence against women and children. Between 2011-2013, 36 child victims received medical care, rehabilitation and vocational training.

192. Government continued efforts to support victim's reintegration and protection. The LWU and the MoLSW provide temporary shelter and services such as accommodation, legal, medical, education and vocational training, economic, family and social re-integration for victims of trafficking. There are also centers run by INGOs and CSOs. The 2013 Shelter Self-improvement Initiative aimed to improve the quality of care and services being provided in shelters serving trafficking victims.

193. From 2011-2015, the MoLSW provided assistance to 555 victims of trafficking who were repatriated from Thailand, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. Assistance, such as temporary shelter, food, clothing, health care, education, and counseling on life skills, was provided to 18 children (8 girls) who were at risk of being trafficked. In addition, the MoLSW provided vocational training to 242 victims of trafficking. At the provincial level, support was provided to 134 child victims of trafficking through physical and mental assistance, vocational training and reintegration into families and schools.

Root causes, in particular poverty and school dropouts

194. The NSEDP (2016-2020) aims to establish a Social Fund in all provinces to help improve the quality of life for victims of trafficking and to establish networks for preventing and combatting trafficking in 800 villages. The Plan strives to deter social problems such as trafficking by raising awareness on laws and regulations on a systematic and regular basis.

195. Government is implementing numerous strategies to combat poverty and to prevent school dropouts. These have already been covered in this report under the sections on the right to life, survival and development and the right to education.

Awareness-raising

196. Between 2011 and 2015, the NCMC, in coordination with the MoLSW, conducted awareness-raising activities on human trafficking (children's rights, safe travel, and the causes and consequences of human trafficking) on two occasions in 20 villages with a total of 216 participants. During the same period, joint activities took place with children and young people on protecting children from human trafficking, violence, and exploitation on seven occasions with a total of 1,375 children (720 girls).

197. Increased attention and funding to support efforts against trafficking have resulted in numerous awareness and prevention campaigns. In 2013, Government and partner organizations conducted a 10-day public awareness campaign in three provinces, which included public talks, a media campaign, and a walk with more than 700 participants. The media has published a variety of articles on human trafficking, covering topics such as safe migration and anti-trafficking training events. MoFA also distributed materials about safe migration and the risks of human trafficking to Lao citizens applying for passports. Furthermore, Government continued to lead or co-lead with CSOs training for officials. Such trainings reached at least 445 officials covering topics such as victim protection and safe migration.

198. As a prevention measure, the Law on Anti-Trafficking states that awareness-raising on trafficking in persons shall be conducted including through the incorporation of activities on anti-trafficking in persons into the educational curriculum.

D. Helplines (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 70)

199. In collaboration with the MoLSW, Peuan Mit (Friends International) operates a three-digit toll-free 24-hour hotline (192) for children and young people. This 24-hour a day, seven days a week hotline offers immediate protection to children at risk of being harmed. The hotline of the LWU (1362) gives advice on women's and children's rights and can be used for reporting suspected cases of domestic violence and trafficking. The hotline is open from Mondays to Fridays from 9am-4pm and is free of charge. Challenges remain for the LWU to ensure sufficient funding to maintain and effectively operate the hotline. The MoPS has a hotline (1300) for the reporting of human traffickers. Victims are referred to the Counseling and Protection Center for Women and Children who provide services for recovery, shelter, medical, legal, vocational training and reintegration of the child into the family and society.

E. Administration of justice (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 72)

200. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure, adopted following broad consultations including consultations with children, defines principles, rules and measures on the management, monitoring, and inspection of the proceedings of juvenile cases in both administrative and legal proceedings. The Strategic Framework for Justice for Children in the Lao PDR (2010-2020) aims to support Government in the implementation of justice for child offenders, child victims, and child witnesses of crime and harmonize the juvenile justice system with international standards and norms.

Child protection services for offenders

201. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure requires that the rights and best interests of the child be taken into consideration when resolving juvenile justice cases. Cases must also take into account the laws and international conventions to which Lao PDR is a party. According to the Law, a social worker or psychologist can participate in all stages of juvenile proceedings to provide assistance in seeking shelter for the child, notify a parent or guardian, report on a child's background and the consequences of any decisions that might be made, assist in recovery and reintegration, follow-up and monitor a child following a court decision or measures that have applied during mediation, provide counseling, and participate in interrogation, interview or mediation proceedings.

202. Village Child Mediation Units are able to assist with civil or criminal acts involving children where the maximum punishment would be no more than three years. In 2013, the MoJ, with support from UNICEF carried out an Assessment of Existing Mediation Practices involving Children. The aim of the assessment was to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the practice of mediation by Village Mediation Units and Village Child Mediation Units. A Child Mediation Decree, under development, will cover the mediation of cases involving children by the Village Child Mediation Units, police and public prosecutors.

Courts for minors and human and financial resources

203. Juvenile Court Chambers have been established within the Provincial Court in all provinces and at the central level. In 2016, there were a total of 80 court officers, 32 of whom were female. Two trainings were organized to disseminate the Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure with a total of 106 participants. A guiding manual for the application of the Law is being developed.

204. The Juvenile Court has jurisdiction to hear all cases concerning children. These include: criminal cases which cannot by law be referred to mediation; criminal cases which can and have been referred to mediation but which could not be resolved; and civil claims

relating to juvenile offending (including acts committed by children below the minimum age of criminal responsibility). In practice, due to an insufficient budget, juvenile courts are not in a separate building. Separate facilities are however set aside to hear cases involving children. In 2015, the Court received a total of 200 new cases, 72 involved drugs, 56 involved stealing, and 12 involved accidents due to breaching traffic rules.

205. In 2013, the People's Supreme Prosecutor, with support from UNICEF, conducted a comprehensive analysis of the justice system as it relates to children, establishing a solid evidence-base for the development of a comprehensive child justice system. This will be used to inform and shape new policies and laws for children in contact with the law and to develop appropriate community-based services. Concrete plans are in place to implement the recommendations of the analysis, including the piloting of alternatives to detention for children in conflict with the law.

206. The People's Supreme Prosecutor developed data forms to collect information on child offenders disaggregated by sex, age and geographic area. The profile will also include educational background, family circumstances, offence committed, referral and next steps. This information will be integrated into a data collection system and inform evidence-based legislative reform and policy development to strengthen the juvenile justice system.

207. The NPAMC (2016-2020) strives to improve the juvenile justice system and juvenile proceedings, and protect and assist children who come in contact with the law, including child victims, witnesses, and offenders. One of the key objectives is to ensure that the process of administration of justice and legal proceeding for children, including interviews of children, the implementation of the law and the punishments imposed on children are proceeded with consideration of the actual circumstances of children, respect for their fundamental rights, consider their special needs and ensure the best interests of children are of primary consideration. The Plan also aims to ensure that the courts, families, and other entities in the justice system take into account the needs of children and their families according to the provisions of the Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure.

Detention as a measure of last resort and for very serious offences

208. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure stipulates that the detention and the deprivation of liberty of child offenders should be used as a measure of last resort. The draft Child Mediation Decree also stipulates that detention should be used as a last resort. Instead of detention, mediation may be used for civil or criminal acts involving children where the maximum punishment would be no more than three years. Warnings, apologies, mediation, compensation and community service are measures that can be applied under mediation. Children under age 15 are not considered to be criminally responsible, but Village Child Mediation Units can mediate cases involving children below age 15.

Detention carried out in compliance with the law and children held for as short a time as possible and separately from adults

209. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedure stipulates when and how to apply detention in juvenile justice. Custody for investigation/interrogation cannot exceed twenty-four hours. Once arrested, remand cannot exceed one month, unless there is a need to continue the investigation/interrogation in which case the duration of the remand can be extended each time for one month, for a maximum of four months for a major offense and eight months for a capital crime. In all cases, girls must be detained separately from boys and children must be detained separately from adults.

210. Pre-sentencing release is the priority in juvenile proceedings, especially when the conditions for remand are terminated. A request for pre-sentencing release may be made by a parent, guardian, close relative, and protector or by the head of the People's Prosecutor, Child Court or Child Court Chamber. The head of the People's Prosecutor must make a decision on the request within twenty-four hours and following a positive decision, the child should be released immediately.

Training of juvenile judges

211. There have been on-going training and curricular revision on child friendly procedures, juvenile justice standards and child rights for over 200 judges, prosecutors and law enforcement officials and some ad hoc training of MoJ officials in child rights. The lack of training and knowledge of dealing with juvenile justice matters is a particular challenge in the criminal justice system. There is a need for regular capacity building and increased knowledge of juvenile justice standards and the criminal process, particularly at the village level. A training needs assessment was conducted in 2015 with support from UNICEF.

F. Protection of witnesses and victims of crimes (CRC/C/LAO/CO/2, para. 73), (CRC/C//OPSC/CO/1, para. 36)

212. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Procedures stipulates that child victims and witnesses can participate in criminal proceedings and propose his/her opinions in all stages of the proceedings. Child victims and witnesses have the right to express his/her opinion, giving due weight to age and maturity and the ability of the child to identify right and wrong; receive assistance from parents, guardian or legal protector in all stages of the proceeding; maintain confidentiality and privacy; and be protected from coercion, threats, discrimination or any type of harm, including from his/her own family members.

213. The Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children includes a series of measures for the protection of and assistance to victims of violence. Child victims have the right to receive assistance from family members, nearby persons, village authorities or other relevant competent authorities; to have his/her rights respected and to be treated in a caring and sensitive/friendly manner; to receive protection and assistance, or to take judicial proceedings against the perpetrator; to request and receive protection from coercion, threats or all forms of harm including from family members; to receive necessary assistance, such as counseling, safe temporary shelter, medical assistance, legal assistance, education, vocational training, and reintegration into the family and society; to receive compensation for harm and psychological recovery; and to have their information be kept confidential.

X. Follow-up to the Optional Protocols

214. In 2015, the NCMC translated the concluding observations from OPSC and OPAC into Lao. The concluding observations were then printed and distributed in both Lao and English to stakeholders, the media, and children through the schools. At the annual meeting of the NCMC, the reports and concluding observations from the Optional Protocols were presented to the NCMC, MCMC, PCMC, and DCMC. The concluding observations are also available on the website of the NCMC. Four workshops on the follow-up to the concluding observations were organized in 2015-2016 in the VTE capital and provincial areas (northern, central, southern).

215. In July 2016, a two-day workshop for provincial defense squadrons was organized by the Ministry of Defense on the follow-up to the concluding observations on OPAC.